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PRESBYTERIANS DECLARE STRONG SUPPORT FOR EAST TIMOR

By Anne Treseder

The Presbyterian Church (USA), one of the major Protestant denominations in the United States, called last week for an embargo on the sale of U.S. weapons to Indonesia in response to Indonesia's devastating and dehumanizing occupation of East Timor.

In a hard-hitting public policy statement on East Timor, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (the denomination's governing body) also appealed to the U.S. government to cease all military aid to Indonesia.

The Presbyterians noted that the international community does not accept as legal the Indonesian conquest of East Timor. They further noted that Indonesian "development" of East Timor has "marginalized" the Timorese and has weakened Timorese language and culture. The Presbyterians called for the participation of the Timorese in the resolution of their problems with Indonesia, and challenged Indonesian churches to "stand in solidarity with those who are oppressed in East Timor."

"This is a real milestone," said Rev. John Chamberlin, national coordinator of East Timor Religious Outreach, an ecumenical group based in San Francisco. "To my knowledge, this is the most definitive statement of support for East Timor ever adopted as official policy by a major U.S. denomination."

Rev. Chamberlin noted that Presbyterian efforts to address the unknown tragedy in East Timor began in 1994, when the Presbytery of San Francisco passed an "overture" to the Presbyterian General Assembly urging condemnation of Indonesian actions in East Timor. The 1994 General Assembly responded by urging all Presbyterians to educate themselves about East Timor and by participating in a National Council of Churches-sponsored fact-finding mission to East Timor in January 1995.

"As a result of what they learned," Rev. Chamberlin said, "the Presbyterians were moved to take action. They resolved to be a voice for the voiceless and stand in solidarity with the people of East Timor. It is my hope that other national religious bodies will follow the example of the Presbyterians."

(July 30, 1995)

NOTE: A copy of the Presbyterian policy statement on East Timor is enclosed.

The 207 General Assembly (1995) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

1. Raises its voice of concern, not only to speak to our own government or to the government of Indonesia, but also, by the rights and duties of partnership, to challenge Indonesian partner churches to stand in solidarity with those who are oppressed in East Timor.

2. Acknowledges that the international community does not accept as legal the de facto Indonesian military occupation of East Timor, and that the United Nations, not recognizing the claim of annexation, continues to hold talks on the political status of East Timor and to monitor the human rights conditions.

3. Rejects the argument that economic development of East Timor is justification for Indonesian control, pointing out that current development patterns are used to marginalize the indigenous people and weaken their language and culture.

4. Affirms that economic aid to East Timor should meet the stated needs of the East Timorese and help develop the necessary educational and technical capacity for present and future development.

5. Calls for the participation of the East Timorese themselves in the resolution of the political problems with Indonesia as essential to their liberty and to the stability of the entire region.

6. Calls on the United States government to cease military aid and to place an embargo on the sale of arms to Indonesia.

7. Supports the application of the Christian Church of East Timor (GKTT) for membership in the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical bodies in order for the East Timorese church to have an independent voice.